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## Federal brucellosis policy is unrealistic

Star-Tribune Editorial Board

A misguided national cattle producers' group wants federal agencies to reduce the number of elk and bison in Yellowstone National Park.

What the feds really need to do is admit that as it stands now, it's not realistic to eliminate brucellosis -- a disease that causes pregnant cows to abort their calves -- in wildlife.

Vaccines developed by the federal government have not been able to prevent the disease in bison, elk and livestock. Until the vaccines are more effective -- and a better delivery system is developed for giving the vaccine to wildlife -- there is no hope of achieving the federal goal of eradicating the disease.

Despite the call of the U.S. Cattlemen's Association for the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior to control bison and elk numbers, management of the wildlife is a state, not federal, responsibility. States already aggressively manage bison. A capture and slaughter program killed 1,600 of the animals last winter in Montana.

Several conservation groups have sued federal and state agencies to close elk feedgrounds, in part because of the documented risk of spreading brucellosis. But Wyoming Game and Fish officials maintain that closing the feedgrounds would not eliminate the disease from the Yellowstone area. Several free-ranging elk herds have an even greater rate of brucellosis infection than the elk at feedgrounds.

While the cattlemen's association contends that bison and elk overgraze Yellowstone, park officials dismiss that claim. They say the animals naturally migrate to lower elevations, where they are more likely to come into contact with cattle.

Montana is in the midst of losing its brucellosis-free market status, a fate which Wyoming will also receive if a second herd in the state tests positive for brucellosis within the next two years -- or if a rancher in Sublette County decides against slaughtering his entire cattle herd.

It must be noted that brucellosis is no longer the health threat to humans it once was. Because most people now drink pasteurized milk, the risk of contracting undulant fever has become virtually nonexistent.

Brucellosis also poses no real threat to wildlife in the Yellowstone region. While the bacterial infection has been known to cause an elk cow to abort her first pregnancy after contracting the disease, the cow is generally able to reproduce normally thereafter.

The feds need to realize that the extreme punishment -- loss of a state's brucellosis-free market status -- is unfair because there is no realistic method of eliminating the disease in wildlife. Other states can restrict Wyoming producers' beef from being exported, or require expensive testing. The economic impact to the state and the industry can be devastating.

Louise Lasley of the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance is correct when she says the response to the brucellosis outbreak in Montana and Wyoming cattle shouldn't be to vaccinate more elk and bison.

"If you look at the sheer numbers, the approach is irresponsible," Lasley told Star-Tribune environment reporter Chris Merrill. "We're basically trying to domesticate wildlife herds for the purposes of somehow being able to inoculate them. It's disturbing from a wildlife perspective, because we're losing the wildness of the herds."

It makes sense to keep trying to manufacture a vaccine that is 100 percent effective on cattle. Researchers should also continue pursuing ways to reduce brucellosis in wildlife. But until those tools are available, the federal policy of eradicating brucellosis altogether is unrealistic -- and actually poses a bigger threat to Wyoming's cattle industry and wildlife than the disease itself.